

Fall 12-11-2023

Divorce and Family Therapy: The Negative Effects of High Conflict Divorce and the Most Effective Interventions for Counselors

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**Divorce and Family Therapy:
The Negative Effects of High Conflict Divorce and the
Most Effective Interventions for Counselors**

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in the
Counselor Education Program at
Winona State University

Academic Semester – Fall 2023

Winona State University
College of Education
Counselor Education Department
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Divorce and Family Therapy: The Negative Effects of High Conflict Divorce
and the Most Effective Interventions for Counselors

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

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Approval Date: 11 December 2023

Abstract

Research concerning high conflict divorce shows significant detrimental effects on the couple divorcing and the children of the marriage. Significant research has focused on the effects of high conflict divorce to the children of the divorcing couple while other research has documented negative effects on the couple including an inhibition of the ability to adjust to life after the separation. While the effects of high conflict divorce have been thoroughly documented, studies on interventions that counselors can use to help with high conflict divorce are much less complete. While some interventions have been discussed, few have been empirically studied as to their effectiveness. Currently, different schools of therapy which have documented success in issues similar to high conflict divorce have been theoretically adapted and proposed as possible interventions. Variations of family systems therapy and integrative family therapy have been advocated for divorce therapy. Alterations of cognitive behavioral therapy have also been proposed as potentially helpful to couples going through a high conflict divorce. Some psychoeducation interventions have had preliminary empirical testing with some early optimistic results. Research should continue to conclusively identify effective therapeutic interventions for divorce therapy. While marriage and family therapy has been established to help couples improve skills needed in a marriage, current research would behoove the modern counselor to consider divorce therapy to help divorcing couples avoid the documented pitfalls of high conflict divorce.

keywords: high-conflict divorce, conflict, divorce, family interventions, children, adjustment, parenting, forgiveness, social network

Contents

Introduction.....5

Review of Literature.....7

 Effects of High Conflict Divorce on Children.....8

 Benefits of Forgiveness of an Ex-Spouse.....14

 Qualities of People Who Can Forgive their Ex-Spouse.....17

 Interventions.....19

 Critique of Interventions.....30

 Effectiveness of Undertested Interventions.....33

Conclusion.....34

References.....36

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It is common for couples to go to marriage and family counseling or couples and family counseling (Newsome & Gladding, 2018) to save a troubled marriage or relationship. Current research creates a strong case that even divorcing couples can benefit from counseling to help minimize or avoid harmful situations (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). This may seem counterintuitive because couples often go to counseling to “save their marriage.” There may be skepticism as to why a couple should seek counseling if they have decided to divorce. A growing body of research demonstrates that not all divorces are equivalent because some divorces cause more harm than others (Størksen et al., 2006). In particular, high conflict divorces can cause immense harm not only to the couple (Gutzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019) but to any children from their marriage (Johnston, 1994). This body of research suggests that counseling may be as appropriate and helpful for a divorcing couple as it may be for a married couple, especially if the couple find themselves in a high conflict divorce (Lebow & Rekart, 2007).

As the rates of divorce increase (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007), counselors will be assisting people more often in this profound change of life. Some will counsel children who must adjust to having a parent no longer live in their home as they visit them on set occasions (Johnston, 1994). Other counselors will meet with adults who feel that their lives have shattered after their spouse begins divorce proceedings (Willen, 2015). Divorce, by its nature, creates a wide range of emotions in those who experience this change of life. An ex-spouse may be a person that was once thought of fondly, so say the least, but time has changed that fondness into feelings of anger and/or sadness (Visser et al., 2017). Feelings of love and appreciation may have been replaced by rage and betrayal (Butkutė et al., 2023). While all divorces include difficult emotions and conflict, some divorces which are more polemic are called high conflict divorce.

Butkutè et al. (2023) describe high conflict divorce as ones “marked by a high degree of anger, hostility, distrust, intensive custody litigation, ongoing difficulty in communicating about the care of their children, and higher-than-usual rates of nonpayment of child support” (p. 1).

Extensive research has documented the effects of high conflict divorce on both the couple divorcing (Gutzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019) and the children of the marriage (Forehand et al., 1994; Garber, 2015). While not as thoroughly researched, there exist some possible interventions and methods for counselors to help those going through high conflict divorce (Ciprić et al., 2022; Lange et al., 2023).

While all divorces are bound to create sad or angered emotions, some divorces have more conflict than others. Matisse (2008) referred to high conflict divorce as the “the angry 20%” (p. 183). Those going through high conflict divorce often experience feelings of furious anger, frustration, and betrayal (Butkutè et al., 2023). It is common that children born to these marriages get caught in the middle of this conflict between their parents (Brinkgeve, 2003). Research shows many damaging effects of high conflict divorce exist not only on the children of such failing marriages but on the adults going through divorce as well (Gutzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Rye et al., 2004). The most challenging question for the counselor who sees people going through such a divorce is, “How can I help?” What are the best interventions a counselor can use to help ease the tension of a high conflict divorce?

There has been a great deal of research around the effects of high conflict divorce on family members (Forehand et al., 1994; Garber, 2015; Hines, 1997; Huurre et al., 2006; Johnston, 2006; Koemer et al., 2006; Modecki et al., 2015), the benefits of a less angry or more forgiving attitude in a divorce (Rye et al., 2004; Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2016), and factors that affect and help create high conflict divorce (Kluwer et al., 2021; Visser et al., 2017; Yárnoz-

Yaben, 2015) . Where continued research is needed the most is in the area of intervention. While so much research has been done to study the negative effects of a high conflict divorce, solid strategies and interventions that can be done by a counselor to help have been minimal (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Nonetheless it is important to both explore the current research around the effects of high conflict divorce and examine current studies into effective counselor strategies and interventions which is truly in its infancy.

Literature Review

The current research into the effects and interventions around high conflict divorce falls into six areas. The first, and by far the most researched, is the effect of high conflict divorce on children (Brinkgeve, 2003; Forehand et al., 1997; Hines, 1997; Huurre et al., 2006; Ivanova et al., 2011; Johnston, 1994; Koemer, 2006; Modecki, 2015; Størksen et al., 2006). The second area of research focuses on the benefits of forgiveness or lower levels of negative emotions between the divorcing couple (Gutzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Rye et al., 2004; Yárnoz-Yaben, at al., 2016). The third area of research focuses on predictors of high conflict divorce (Kluwer et al., 2021; Koruk and Vapuriu, 2022; Visser et al., 2017; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2015). In other words, what factors in divorce correlate often with a high conflict divorce. The fourth area focuses on what sorts of interventions can help either individuals or families going through a divorce lower their levels of anger and conflict (Lange et al., 2023; Lebow & Rekart, 2007; Matise, 2008; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Navidian & Bahari, 2014; Rye et al., 2005; Willen, 2015). The fifth area critiques leading theories and interventions around high conflict divorce and reminds counselors that no one solution will help all families of high conflict divorce (Johnston, 2006; Mandarino et al., 2016). Finally, the sixth area gives some hope to the effectiveness of even simple, minimally tested interventions (Ciprić et al., 2016).

Effects of High Conflict Divorce on Children

By far the most extensive research concerning high conflict divorce is on the effect it has on children of the divorcing couple. “As a group, children of high-conflict divorce, especially boys, are 2 to 4 times more likely to be clinically disturbed in emotions and behavior compared with national norms” (Johnston, 1994, p. 165). For the sake of summarizing a large body of research in one paper, this report will focus on the effects of high conflict divorce on adolescents. It is reasonable to suggest that long term, high conflict divorce will eventually affect an adolescent child of the couple even if the divorce proceedings began when that child was younger.

Numerous studies have shown a connection between parental divorce, adolescent distress, and long-term negative effects. Størksen et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study of 8,984 Norwegian adolescents (ages 13-19 years). They found among adolescents in the study with non-divorced parents 14% had substantial distress symptoms. Among adolescents of divorced parents, 30% were classified as having substantial distress symptoms. This data was acquired with self-reporting surveys of the students which included testing for anxiety and depression. While the results showed higher levels of distress in adolescents of parental divorce, levels of anxiety and depression were significantly higher among girls than boys. Størksen et al. (2006) also highlighted the variance within the adolescents that had experienced parental divorce. “There was a larger variance among the adolescents in the Divorce group compared to those in the No Divorce group, which suggests that some adolescents, but not all, are affected negatively by divorce” (p.83). While the data shows increased distress, anxiety, and depression for adolescents of divorced parents, many of those in this study showed levels of distress similar to adolescents whose parents had not divorced. This suggests that while parental divorce is an

indicator of distress, anxiety, and depression, it is not the whole story. Størksen et al. (2006) discussed possibilities for this difference including the high conflict nature of many divorces:

When... there is more psychological distress and reduced well-being in adolescents of divorce, the reason could be enduring conflict and problems in the family, e.g., because of disagreement about custody. There is also a possibility that adolescents to a larger extent than younger children are made to feel for choice of where to live, and that this could represent a source of loyalty conflict with a concomitant reduction of psychological adjustment. (p.81)

Similar results were found in a longitudinal study by Huurre et al. (2006) which surveyed 1,471 adolescents aged 16. This study administered a follow up survey when they were 32 to study the long-term effects of parental divorce. Their study compared adolescents whose parents became divorced before they were 16 (n=317) to those whose parents had not divorced before they were 16 (n=1069). Statistically by the age of 32, members of the original cohort who had experienced parental divorce before 16 showed greater occurrences of “shorter education, unemployment, divorce, negative life events and more risky health behavior” (p. 256). Females in this cohort also showed higher scores on the Beck Depression Inventory. Similar to Størksen et al. (2006), Huurre et al. (2006) noticed variables which led them to conclude:

It is possible and even probable that parental divorce is mainly an indicator of other problems that may be more prevalent in these families. Divorce often involves a lengthy sequence of pre-divorce experiences, such as continual parental discord, the effects of which may be even more important for children’s welfare than the separation as such.” (p. 261)

Both of these studies noticed increased negative effects for adolescents of parental divorce as a whole but, looking at the data, suspected that factors including the conflict within the divorce were actually producing the anxiety, depression, and other negative effects which were documented.

Several studies sought to answer the question, “Why do some adolescents have such negative effects associated with their parents’ divorce while others do not?” Hines (1997) conducting a meta-analysis of several studies noted that parental divorce promotes growth for some while creating vulnerabilities for others and concluded that one of the primary differences is level of conflict within the divorce. Hines (1997) cited research on antisocial behavior that concluded that adolescents in “conflict-ridden families are more likely to commit delinquent acts” (p. 376). Hines (1997) also noted that high conflict family situations affect children and adolescents before the divorce actually occurs. “The impact of the divorce on children and adolescents may be affected not only by the stress of the breakup and the events following it, but also by intense marital conflict and dysfunctional processes that preceded the breakup” (p. 380). Hines (1997) also noted that families in high conflict divorces are less likely to be able to help their adolescent children through the difficult transition of divorce because of their own difficulties in dealing with the transition.

Modecki et al. (2015) looked specifically at how nonresidential fathers interacted with their adolescent children after a divorce and found a strong correlation between high conflict divorce and negative outcomes 9 years later. The study gathered data from 156 adolescents who were able to participate in all waves of data collection. All participants had parents that had divorced within two years prior to the baseline assessment. There were six waves of data collection over nine years. Modecki et al. (2015) examined both the involvement that the father

had in their children's lives and the amount of conflict that existed between the (now divorced) parents through interviews and assessments. Their results indicated that parental conflict created the most negative long-term effects including various forms of externalizing problems and difficulties with academic functioning. Modecki et al. (2015) drew a strong conclusion, "Results indicate that greater paternal psychosocial support and more frequent father-adolescent contact do not outweigh the negative impact of interparental conflict on youth outcomes in the long term" (p. 123). The finding of Modecki et al. (2015) determined that interparental conflict was a critical predictor of poor adjustment following divorce. The strength of parental conflict as an indicator of negative effects in adolescent children led Forehand et al. (1994) to conclude that interparental conflict should be the focus of all counseling intervention around parental divorce.

Some research has concluded that interparental conflict forces adolescents to deal with adult issues prematurely. Koemer et al. (2006) conducted a qualitative study of 81 adolescents whose parents were divorced. Their findings offered support for their theory that sensitive material disclosures from divorced parents are related to adolescents feeling older than their same aged peers. They listed examples of "sensitive disclosures" as being called upon by one's mother for emotional assistance and discussions about financial concerns following a divorce. The study concluded that such emotional and financial sharing between parents and adolescent children caused adolescents to feel older and become more socially active (e.g., early dating) (Koemer et al., 2006).

A larger quantitative study by Ivanova et al. (2011) of 1,487 Dutch adolescents concluded that parental divorce sped up the transition to dating and relationship seeking when experienced early in adolescence. "Adolescents who experienced a parental divorce progressed to first dating episode faster than adolescents from intact families" (p.774). This finding suggests

that adolescents who experience divorce engage in adult activities quicker than those of families who do not experience divorce. Ivanova et al. (2011) concluded that it is possible that exposure to adult drama such as listening to their parents' difficulties in a divorce pushes them to feel more adult and prematurely begin adult activities.

Brinkgreve (2003) made a similar conclusion in a qualitative study of adolescents in the Netherlands who had experienced parental divorce. Many stressed the mature responsibilities they were given because their parents found it difficult to cope with divorce. Brinkgreve (2003) noted that this reversal of roles often felt like a burden to many participants in the study.

While these various negative outcomes in the children of high conflict divorce seem unrelated. They range from difficulty adjusting following the divorce (Modecki et al., 2015) to increased delinquent acts (Hines, 1997) to early dating and sexual behavior (Ivanova et al., 2006; Koemer et al., 2006) to greater occurrence later in life of negative outcomes like unemployment, divorce and risky health behavior (Huurre et al., 2006), they all can be seen as related if viewed through the lens of Eric Ericson's psychosocial stages of life.

Erik Erikson maintained that humans go through eight psychosocial developmental stages. During each stage, a person experiences a psychosocial crisis which could have a positive or negative outcome for personality development (McLeod, 2018). The goal of each stage is to develop a skill which helps with future stages (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). The goal of the identity vs. role confusion stage which adolescents experience is to develop a personal identity (Rogers, 2018). Erikson would claim that adolescents would forge a role for themselves in the social world around them (Brittan & Learner, 2013). This could be expressed in education goals, career plans, and how they see themselves as sexual beings (Sigelman & Rider, 2012, p. 343).

High conflict divorce creates a unique difficulty in the mind of an adolescent going through the identity vs. role confusion stage. The identity vs. role confusion stage of adolescence is a self-centered time in a young person's life. Some adults and parents remark at the difficulty of raising and living with a teenager who has become so self-centered, but Erikson would argue that this is exactly the focus that the adolescent needs at this stage. They are discovering their own identity. A time of introspection and self-concentration is critical. The trauma of a high conflict parental divorce takes the adolescent's mind away from the focus on self and directs it to the sadness, conflict, and anxiety of their parents. Instead of thinking about themselves and their identity, adolescents are now focusing more on their parents' problems (Koemer, 2006, Størksen, 2006). This has the potential of interrupting and impeding the process of identity discovery that Erikson stated all adolescents must accomplish (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). This creates a greater probability of failure at the identity vs. role confusion stage (Bogerts et al., 2021).

Erikson predicted that those who could not find an identity during this stage would have great trouble during the next stage, the intimacy vs. isolation stage where they learn to share their lives with a significant other (Meacham et al., 1982; Malek, 2019). Erikson's psychosocial development theory predicts that adolescents who are not allowed or able to fully develop an identity will have trouble forming long lasting intimate relationships (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). The empirical data presented here supports this. Adolescents who have experienced high conflict parental divorce experienced increased rates of relationship problems and divorce later in life (Forehand et al., 1997; Huurre et al., 2006; Modecki et al., 2015; Størksen et al., 2006). They also experienced difficulties in other areas Erikson claimed was essential to identity like employment and education (Huurre et al., 2006).

At first glance, the difficulties surrounding children of high conflict divorce seem various and unrelated, but when viewed through Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, these various negative outcomes can be seen as linked (Rogers, 2018). They are all consequences of an interrupted identity vs. role confusion stage of development. The high conflict divorce forces the adolescent to take their attention away from themselves and focus instead on conflict of their parents' divorce (Koerner et al., 2006). Since each of Erikson's stages relies on lessons learned in previous stages (Sigelman & Rider, 2012), this distraction will not only negatively affect the child in the immediate adjustment, but it will also affect later stages in life (Huurre et al., 2006; Malek, 2019).

These studies highlight the problems and negative outcomes of adolescents who deal with high conflict parental divorces. These studies might serve as a warning to divorcing parents of the ways high conflict divorce harm their children especially in a shared custody arrangement.

Benefits of Forgiveness of an Ex-Spouse

Several studies take the opposite direction. Instead of focusing on the negative outcomes of a high conflict divorce, they stress the benefits of forgiving the ex-spouse, lowering negative emotions, and ultimately reducing the conflict in the divorce. These studies highlight the positive benefits of people who can forgive their ex-spouse (Guzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Rye et al., 2004, Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2016). Following this motif, Yárnoz-Yaben et al. (2016) conclude, "The present study complements the existing literature about the importance of forgiveness in the subjective wellbeing of the parents" (p. 1905).

Guzman-Gonzalez et al. (2019) studied 1008 divorced or separated individuals from Chile. The participants were given a test called the Questionnaire of Forgiveness in Divorce and

Separation in order to determine the forgiveness towards the former partner. The participants were also given the Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test to measure the adjustment to divorce and separation (ADS). Guzman-Gonzalez et al. (2019) concluded that there was a strong correlation between forgiveness of the ex-partner and adjustment to divorce or separation. In other words, the more one was able to forgive their ex-spouse the better one was able to adjust to separation or divorce.

It is important to understand the limitations that Guzman-Gonzalez et al. (2019) recognize in their study. “Due to the correlational cross-sectional design of this research, we are not able to conclude causal associations amongst variables” (p. 3018). In much simpler language, this study surveys a large number of people of different ages and other variables at the same time (cross sectional design) and found correlations between forgiveness of the ex-spouse and the ability to adjust well to life after the marriage. The study, by its nature, cannot tell which variable caused the other. Did the people who forgave their ex-spouse adjust better after the divorce? Or did people who adjusted well after the divorce feel better able to forgive their ex-spouse?

Guzman-Gonzalez et al. (2019) ultimately see these results as evidence that forgiveness and a lowering of negative emotions towards the ex-spouse is beneficial not only to children from the marriage but the ability of the couple to adjust to life after the divorce or separation:

The focus on forgiveness as a target is relevant considering previous evidence indicating that process-based forgiveness interventions are effective in reducing mental problems (e.g., depression, anger, hostility, stress) among diverse populations groups who had experienced a wide range of sources of hurt.” (p. 3018)

Guzman et. al (2019) see healing benefits in forgiveness of the ex-spouse and encourage interventions that promote the “reconceptualization of the transgression encouraging more benign attributions and empathy to the former partner” (p. 3018) although they do not elaborate on specifically what these interventions might entail.

Yárnoz-Yaben et al. (2016) was a correlational, cross-sectional design focusing on the wellbeing of parents following a divorce. They compared forgiveness and subjective well-being in 223 divorced parents in Spain. Each participant completed a 5-item Questionnaire for Forgiveness in Divorce and Separation. This assessment was also a series of statements with Likert-style responses ranging from 1- totally disagree to 5- totally agree. Such statements included, “I hope my former spouse gets what he/she deserves for all the hurt he/she has caused me” and “I have totally forgiven my ex-spouse” (pp. 1910-1911). The Positive and Negative Affect assessment was also given to participants. This 10-item assessment asked “the respondent to rate the frequency of positive feelings (joy, interest, contentment) or negative feelings (sadness, fear, and restlessness) in a given period. Participants also completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) which consists of five statements (e.g., I am satisfied with my life) answered on a 5-point Likert scale.

Yárnoz-Yaben et al. (2016) stated that, “individuals with high levels of positive affect, over time, were more forgiving of their ex-spouses” (p. 1905). This led them to conclude, “The present study compliments the existing literature about the importance of forgiveness in post-divorce coparenting highlighting the place of forgiveness in the subjective well-being of divorced parents” (p. 1905).

Yárnoz-Yaben et al. (2016), similar to Guzman-Gonzalez (2019) concede the limitations of a correlational, cross-sectional design. There is no way to know if forgiveness of the ex-

spouse is helping to create a more positive affect post-divorce or if those with a more positive affect find it easier to forgive their ex-spouse. Under their “limitations” section Yárnoz-Yaben et al. (2016) admit, “it could be that people who are more satisfied with life may have more amicable divorces, which make it easier to forgive their ex-spouses” (p. 1915).

This body of research shows positive correlation between forgiveness of an ex-spouse and many positive outcomes relating to an individual’s ability to cope and adjust to a divorce. While these studies give hope to those who can lower negative emotions and find the ability to forgive their ex-spouse, it provides little assistance to a counselor searching for meaningful interventions to work with an angered and unforgiving client who has recently gone through a painful and high conflict divorce.

Qualities of People who Can Forgive their Ex-Spouse

If anger, conflict and unforgiveness are harmful to the divorcing couple and their children and more positive, forgiving feelings have more positive outcomes including better adjustment to the divorce, a set of studies asked the question, “What qualities do forgiving (or unforgiving) couples have?” In other words, what phenomenon can be found in forgiving couples? These studies looked for external factors of the divorced couple that contributed to a more forgiving (or less forgiving) interaction (Koruk & Vapurui, 2022; Visser et al., 2017; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2015).

Sagrario Yárnoz-Yaben (2015) examined the data from the same 223 divorced participants as Yárnoz-Yaben et al. (2016). This study focused on the data comparing the responses to the Adjustment to Divorce-Separation Questionnaire and the Support Received from the Former Spouse Questionnaire. It is important to remember that all participants in this study also had children.

Yárnoz-Yaben (2015) found a high correlation between support from the former spouse and forgiveness. In other words, the more forgiving the subject was of their ex-spouse the more support they received from that ex-spouse. Since correlation studies can't determine cause, this study can also give evidence that the more support they received from their ex-spouse (presumably in co-parenting and finances) the more they were likely to forgive their ex-spouse.

In another study, Visser et al. (2017) examined data on 110 divorced parents “who were referred for intervention at several family centers in the Netherlands, because the wellbeing of their children was threatened by parents’ long-lasting conflicts, aggression, and anger surrounding parental decisions” (p. 3060). Participants completed a 12-item Dutch translation of the Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory to rate their feelings of forgiveness towards their former spouse. Each item was answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Statements in this assessment included, “I want to see my ex-partner hurt and miserable” (p. 3058) and “Although my ex-partner hurt me, I am putting the hurts aside so we can resume our contact” (p. 3058).

This data was compared to (among other facets) an assessment created by the authors to test perceived social network disapproval of the ex-spouse. This assessment started with each parent making a list of people who “were involved in and concerned by the divorce” (Visser et al., 2017, p. 3058). Then for each person listed, the participant rated four statements on a 5-point Likert scale. An example of a statement in this assessment was, “In general, my network supports rapprochement and compromise with my ex-partner” (Visser et al., 2017, p. 3058).

Visser et al. (2017) found that “perceived social network disapproval was negatively related to forgiveness” (p. 3055). In other words, the more the subject perceived their social network to disapprove of the ex-spouse, the less likely they were to be forgiving of them.

Also looking at social support, Koruk and Vapuriu (2022) studied 150 individuals who were divorced or going through the legal divorce process. “The findings showed that perceived social support positively predicted divorce adjustment at high levels” (p. 277). This shows the effects of social support to be a paradox. On the one hand Koruk & Vapuriu (2022) showed that support from a social circle (e.g., friends and family) can help one adjust and overcome the pain of divorce. On the other hand, if that social network portrays the ex-spouse negatively, they may encourage the divorcee to hold onto negative feelings and resentment (Visser et al., 2017). This has been shown to negatively impact the ability to adjust and move on from the pain of a divorce (Rye et al., 2004; Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2015)

Visser et al. (2017) and Koruk and Vapuriu (2022) can serve as reminders that attitudes towards an ex-spouse be they forgiving or resentful are never formed in a vacuum. These studies show that harmful anger or resentment in a divorce which can lead to a high conflict divorce is significantly influenced by a divorcee’s social network. A social network that supports and encourages the divorcee to develop “a new chapter” in their life can be helpful in easing resentment (Koruk & Vapuriu, 2022), but a social network which constantly reminds the divorcee how horrible their ex-spouse was to them can inadvertently encourage the divorcee to live in the painful past and continue to carry anger and resentment (Visser et al., 2017). Holding onto anger and resentment opens the door to conflict severity, hostility and ultimately the traumatic impact of the divorce (Kluwer et al., 2021).

Interventions

Much research around high conflict divorce focused on their negative emotions of anger and resentment. Many studies either warn of the dangers of conflict and anger in a divorce (Huurre et al., 2006; Johnston, 1994; Koemer et al., 2006; Malek, 2019; Modeski et al., 2015;

Størksen et al., 2006) or discuss the benefits of the opposite namely forgiveness and a lessening of angered feelings (Guzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Rye et al., 2004; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2015).

Other studies search for factors which predict conflict (or a lack thereof) in a divorce (Koruk & Vapuriu, 2022; Visser et al., 2017; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2015). Not many studies create an intervention a counselor can use to help lower anger and resentment in a high conflict divorce. Fewer still evaluate the effectiveness of a clear plan. Nevertheless, there exist a few interventions to help divorced clients who are in a high-conflict divorce. Some are merely suggestions of interventions based on their success with something similar to high-conflict divorce (Lebow & Rekart, 2007; Matise, 2008; Micham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Other interventions have some basic beginning studies into their efficacy (Lange, 2023; Navidian & Bahari, 2013; Willen, 2015). This would seem to be the most helpful to a counselor who sees clients in a high conflict divorce. While there are few such studies, there are some that are worth discussing.

Matise (2008) reviewed the book *Defusing the High-Conflict Divorce: A Treatment Guide for Working with Angry Couples* by Bernard Gaulier, Judith Margerum, Jerome Price, and James Windell. Matise (2008) notes that this work used family systems therapy which has had success with marriage counseling as a framework for divorce counseling. Matise (2008) notes that every participant in a family doesn't act alone and this is still true even if the family is experiencing a divorce:

If there is a central message of this book, it may be that high-conflict divorces do not occur in a vacuum. Barraged on every side of a family are often more family and friends who influence the context and behavior of the coparents and children involved. By recognizing patterns of dysfunction in couples and families, professionals can work to

better know how and when to intervene to facilitate couples and families to make the transition to a different style of life after a divorce. (p.183)

It is certainly debatable if family systems counseling is as effective with couples and families going through divorce as those who are trying to create a strong family to avoid a divorce. Nevertheless, Matisse (2008) assumes that the same principles that help strengthen a marriage and family can also create a better (and less harmful) divorce. This notion may seem counterintuitive. Many couples and families seek counseling to better their family with the ultimate goal of avoiding divorce. Matisse (2008) notes that it may be possible to use family counseling not just to potentially save a marriage but rather to facilitate a less harmful divorce. While this notion needs more testing, it is a logical notion to search in the area of family systems therapy to help the way family members interact even if a divorce has happened or is inevitable. A divorced couple can often still function as a family unit and many of the principles of family systems therapy would still apply to a divorced couple sharing parental responsibilities (Matisse, 2008).

In a similar fashion, Lebow and Rekart (2007) advocate for integrative family therapy for families in the midst of a high-conflict divorce. For Lebow and Rekart (2007) integrating techniques that have proven successful for marriage and family therapy may prove helpful for couples who are in the midst of divorce and their families. Lebow and Rekart (2007) advocate for a solution-based integrative family intervention that focuses on the actual content of the conflict:

Aspects of this treatment include negotiating a clear therapy contract, creating multipartial alliance with all parties, assessing through the lens of specific understandings about these cases, incorporating multiple therapy session formats, holding both systemic

and individual focused perspectives, incorporating a solution-oriented focus, and drawing upon a wide range of intervention techniques. The treatment aims to create a good-enough postdivorce climate in which a new family structure can be constituted in which parents maintain distance from one another, and conflict and triangulation can be minimized. (p. 79)

In the end, Lebow and Rekart (2007) take a very practical approach to the issues of high-conflict divorce focusing not on the intense emotions often associated with a high-conflict divorce, but rather the situations which create the conflict. By creating boundaries and practical guidelines, this conflict can be largely avoided. While this idea has a certain undeniable internal logic, it largely remains untested in empirical observation.

Also utilizing a solution focused model, Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) advocate for a role called a parenting coordinator which uses techniques formerly found in different roles to create a professional who can practically lead couples through a divorce in ways that facilitate the least conflict for themselves and their children:

A need exists for a new method of intervention that blends the role of the court (issuing parenting plans and visitation requirements) with the role of the counselor (a background in counseling/psychology) and the family mediator (encouraging so-parenting of the shared childing and setting disagreements). (p. 370)

Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) use a multifaceted plan that focuses on practical solutions to the problems of co-parenting arrangements and other practical issues within the high conflict divorce. While this also has its own internal logic, it is ultimately untested. In addition, these

ideas for intervention do not address the angered emotions that so often fuel the problems of a high-conflict divorce.

While there have been programs that have been created to help divorcing parents deescalate their high conflict divorce, very few of them have been empirically tested. One program that has received at least beginning levels of empirical testing has been a program which the Anna Freud Charity (2023) in the United Kingdom currently sponsors called No Kid in the Middle. This program uses a closed psychoeducation group counseling model focusing on teaching parents to find less conflictual ways of coparenting (Anna Freud, 2023). This program has separate weekly group sessions for parents and children over a course of nine weeks.

No Kid in the Middle lists its strengths as both psychoeducation and universality. Each group consists of between six and eight families (Anna Freud, 2023). The goal of this group therapy model is twofold. The first is to educate. In keeping with psychoeducational group counseling, parents are taught better ways of parenting through a divorce that reduces conflict (Anne Freud, 2023). Parents are also taught about the negative psychological and emotional outcomes of children of high conflict divorces. Children, in their groups, are taught that their parents' conflict and difficult emotions are not their responsibility (Anna Freud, 2023). These groups also use the group counseling quality of universality to help both parents and their children. Parents share stories of their difficulties to encourage parents to gain support and learn from other families in similar situations. In a similar manner, children in their groups are given a safe space to talk about their feelings and issues around their parents' divorce (Anna Freud, 2023).

No Kid in the Middle is one of very few studies to receive empirical testing and evaluation for its effectiveness. Lange et al. (2023) studied 167 parents involved in high conflict

divorces. They answered questionnaires before taking this nine-week program, soon after they completed the program, and six months after completing the No Kid in the Middle (NKM) program. The questionnaires focused on self-reports of parental conflicts, hostile attributions of the ex-partner, and social network approval of the ex-partner. These participants were compared to a convenience sample of 136 parents who were not involved with high conflict divorces who took a single questionnaire (Lange et al., 2023).

This study showed a significant reduction in parental conflict and social network disapproval throughout all assessments while hostile intentions did not change (Lange, 2023). So early testing for a group intervention focusing on psychoeducation showed that NKM created less conflict and less social network disapproval for the parents who participated. Interestingly, the parents' feeling of hostility towards their ex-partner remained the same (Lange, 2023). While this study is merely the beginning in testing the efficacy of such programs, there seems to be signs of success in group therapy programs that teach skills to reduce conflict in a divorce. Some of these techniques are still effective even if they still hold angered feelings toward the ex-partner (Lange, 2023).

While the No Kid in the Middle program used psychoeducation to focus on what was best for positive outcomes for the children affected by the divorce, Rye et al. (2005) examined a group therapy intervention focusing on forgiveness of an ex-spouse. Some researchers theorize that the key to deescalating a high conflict divorce is through forgiveness of the ex-spouse. It was previously discussed that certain studies demonstrated a correlation between forgiveness of an ex-spouse and better outcomes both for the children of the marriage and the divorced individuals themselves (Guzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2015). Rye et al. (2005) specifically studied a specific intervention designed to help divorcees forgive their ex-spouse.

Rye et al. (2005) studied a group therapy intervention. These 90-minute group interventions took place once a week for eight weeks. The curriculum of these interventions, “were composed of a variety of activities, discussion topics and homework assignments designed to facilitate forgiveness toward one’s ex-spouse” (p. 883). This study examined 149 participants who completed one of three interventions to which they were assigned randomly. One intervention was a secular based forgiveness intervention, one was a religious based forgiveness intervention, and one was a comparison group that received no intervention (Rye et al., 2005).

Although the study started with 192 participants, 149 completed their intervention. These participants completed several assessments to compare with the participants in the other groups. The 149 participants completed the Forgiveness Scale, which is used to judge the “level of forgiveness toward the ex-spouse” (Rye et al., 2005, p. 884). This scale consisted of 15 Likert-style items with responses ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree. The participants were also given the Trait Anger Inventory and the Beck Depression Inventory. Participants completed these tests before the intervention, after the intervention, and a follow-up six weeks after the completion of the intervention.

The study concluded that participants in both the religious and the secular interventions scored much higher than the group that did not participate in an intervention on self-reported forgiveness of the ex-spouse. The study also concluded that participants in the secular intervention scored “a greater decrease in depressive symptoms than comparison participants” (Rye et al., 2005, p. 880). Rye et al. (2005) attribute much of the healing that led to lower depression scores to the therapeutic quality of forgiveness. They cite other studies including Rye et al. (2004) which provide evidence that “self-reported forgiveness of an ex-spouse relates to positive mental health outcomes” (Rye et al., 2005, p. 890).

While Lange et al. (2023) studied a group intervention based on psychoeducation and Rye et al. (2005) tested a group intervention based on forgiving the ex-spouse, Willen (2015) explored using techniques from the cognitive behavioral therapy school to address the hurt and angered emotions that exist in a high conflict divorce. Willen (2015) documented a beginning qualitative study meant to address negative feelings towards an ex-spouse in a high conflict divorce. Willen (2015) used emotion regulation therapy as a theoretical framework for this study. Emotion regulation therapy (ERT) uses concepts similar to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to focus on negative emotions.

CBT argues that our thoughts lead to our emotions which lead to our actions which can create more of the same thoughts (Gilihan, 2018). This can be seen for example in depression. Depressed thoughts (“no one likes my company”) can lead to depressed emotions (loneliness) which can lead to depressed actions (avoiding social events). This can then lead to more depressed thoughts as a weekend alone can strengthen the notion in the depressed thoughts that no one wants their company. From this, a vicious circle of depression can develop (Wells, 2020).

Using the CBT concept that emotions can be swayed by changing one’s behaviors and restructuring one’s thoughts or cognitions, ERT uses specific actions and cognitive restructuring to affect one’s feelings and emotions. Willen (2015) specifically adapts ERT to assist parents going through a high conflict divorce in five phases. The first is situation selection. This is a behavioral technique where someone may avoid triggers that create high intense angered emotions toward the ex-spouse. “For example, divorced parents may avoid parent-teacher conferences if they know the former partner/ spouse will be in attendance because of the risk of conflict” (p.359). Second is situation modification which is also a behavioral technique where the parent will choose a solution to a problem instead of openly expressing angered emotions:

For example, when a divorced parent learns his or her children are allowed to play computer games late at night at the other parent's home, his or her initial response may be either to voice anger and disapproval or simply to accept the parents have different rules. However, if the parent uses the situation modification strategy, he or she will instead meet with the former partner/ spouse to discuss joint rules for their children at each parents' residence. (Willen, 2015, p. 360)

The third phase is attention deployment strategy. This is a cognitive restructuring technique where a parent focuses their attention on positive aspect of the difficult situation:

“For example, while a divorced parent may be dissatisfied with his or her partner's care, he or she may focus on the children's joy in being together with the other parent rather than on his or her perceptions of the other's deficiencies as a parent” (Willen, 2015, p. 360).

The fourth phase is cognitive reappraisal. This is a strategy where the parent reevaluates their emotional situation to see positive aspects of the situation. “For example, while a divorced parent who may have opposed the divorce, as he or she reappraises the family situation he or she may eventually accept that the marriage was unsuccessful” (Willen, 2015). This also encourages the parent to cognitively focus on positive aspects of their new life no longer being married to their ex-partner.

The fifth technique of this is response modulation. This is last effort when, “when a high intensity level of regulation reappraisal is no longer possible” (Willen, 2015, p.360). The techniques often include behavior or mindfulness strategies that prevent openly angered or inappropriate behavior at the moment of high intense emotion.

Willen (2015) hypothesized that parents who constructively and flexibly used emotion regulation strategies would, “express more satisfaction and well-being as compared with parents who reported less effective emotion regulation strategies” (p.362). Willen (2015) was a beginning qualitative study conducting semi structured interviews with 55 people, which consisted of 10 couples and 35 individuals. All participants were interviewed twice, once 3 years after their divorce and once 5 years after their divorce. In the follow up interview 2 years after the first one, additional questions were asked to explore issues that arose in the first interview (Willen, 2015).

Willen (2015) concluded that two main themes emerged from these interviews concerning the subject of emotion regulation. One group showed emotion regulation flexibility. Willen (2015) described this as taking, “flexible, situation-appropriate actions with regard to emotion regulation” (p. 362). This group naturally employed techniques described above in ERT to find solutions to problems without resorting to using high conflict emotions and behaviors. The other group, Willen (2015) claimed, showed emotion regulation rigidity where negative emotions persisted and there is no long-term change of emotions like the former group. While Willen (2015) gives many possible reasons for the rigidity and why certain participants held onto negative emotions, the participants who showed a rigid quality in their understanding of the divorce also showed strong negative emotions which persisted years after the divorce. Willen (2015) quotes one participant as an example of this rigidity. “I’ve lots of theories about why this all happened. It’s this whole thing... the adultery. I can’t get over it. I haven’t gone on with my life” (p. 365).

Willen (2015) acknowledges that much more study needs to be done on this theory but concludes that therapeutic interventions can be developed to encourage couples (or individuals)

in high conflict divorce to use emotion regulation therapy to encourage more flexible emotion regulation. This will ultimately help those going through high conflict divorce move from severe anger and hurt emotions to healing (Willen, 2015). Only when more specific interventions are created from this theoretical model will it be possible to further study it for its effectiveness.

While Willen (2015) focused on cognitive and behavioral solutions to help the intense emotions associated with high conflict divorce, Navidian and Bahari (2014) concentrated on cognitive distortions as a way to help ease intense angered emotions. The theoretical belief underlying this study was that cognitive distortions were the primary fuel behind the angered emotions of high conflict divorce. This study took place in Iran where a couple must participate in marriage counseling before a divorce may be legally granted (Financial Tribune, 2017). Navidian and Bahari (2014) examined the effect of hope-based interventions, forgiveness-based interventions, and interventions that mix hope and forgiveness against a control group. Of 440 couples who were referred to the Crisis Intervention Center undergoing predivorce counseling, 60 were randomly selected to four groups. One would participate in eight, 45-60-minute hope-based couples counseling sessions. One would participate in eight, 45-60-minute forgiveness-based couples counseling sessions. One would participate in eight, 45-60-minute counseling sessions that were mixed hope and forgiveness based. And one was a control group on the waiting list for couples counseling (Navidian & Bahari, 2014).

Navidian and Bahari (2014) had each participant complete the Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale (ICDS) once before their eight counseling sessions and once 8 weeks after the end of the sessions. The ICDS uses three subscales: interpersonal rejection, interpersonal irrational expectation and interpersonal interpretation (Navidian & Bahari, 2014). "This scale measures the severity of total interpersonal cognitive distortions that an individual might exhibit

in their relationships with others” (p. 661). Using this method, each group could be compared before and after their marriage counseling sessions with the control group that had not yet entered counseling. Navidian and Bahari (2014) concluded that while the hope-focused and forgiveness focused groups showed no significant difference with the control group, the mixed hope and forgiveness focused marriage counseling showed a significant decrease in cognitive distortions especially in the subscales of interpersonal irrational expectations and interpersonal misconceptions.

While this is a beginning study into qualities of interventions that may help divorcing couples reduce cognitive distortions and ultimately reduce the intense emotions often associated with high conflict divorce, Navidian and Bahari (2014) advocate for continued research into interventions that can “decrease irrational beliefs among married couples” (p. 665).

Critique of Interventions

Many of these interventions have relied on family systems therapy (Matisse, 2008) or variations on cognitive behavioral therapy (Navidian & Bahari, 2014; Willen, 2015) so that the couple can begin either change their behaviors or reframe their thinking about their ex-partner. Much of the research and theories advocated to this point have rested on notions that if the participant could only see their ex-partner in a more civil manner (Lange, 2023; Lebow & Rekart, 2007) or in a more forgiving light (Rye et al., 2004; Yamon-Yaben et al., 2016) then their partner would not seem so malevolent, and conflict would diminish. This softening of attitude is the key to many approaches to high-conflict divorce. Two studies ask the question, “Are these approaches appropriate for all couples?” These studies entertain the notion of justified anger and question whether this softening of emotion is not harmful to the victim of an abusive ex-spouse (Johnston, 2006; Mandarino et al., 2016). They consider the possibility that some

people while in a marriage were truly abusive to their ex-spouse and any attempt at softening angered feelings (Rye et al., 2004) or restructuring (e.g., Garber, 2015; Navidian & Bahari, 2014; Willen, 2015) merely allows the abuse to continue.

A fundamental belief in interventions that use forgiveness is the belief that if a divorcee understands the one who hurt them better, forgiveness and a softening of angered emotion is possible. Enright (2001) expressed this cornerstone of forgiveness succinctly: “The decision to forgive is a wonderful way to open up the heart and the mind. Those who focused on their anger before making the decision to forgive often find that, after making the decision, they are able to view the offender in a new light” (p. 140).

This opening and understanding of an ex-spouse who hurt one may be useful if the ex-spouse cares about their ex and their children, but Johnston (2006) warns that some may not express or exhibit this sense of mutual care. Some spouses don’t make mistakes that relationship therapy can overcome. Some spouses (or ex-spouses) are simply abusive. Johnston (2006) warns that in cases like this forgiveness or a greater understanding may not be what is needed but rather what is needed are, “guidelines for making access plans that minimize adverse effects on children, restrains further abuse, and protects parents who have been victimized” (p. 15).

Mandarino et al. (2016) examined this in greater depth in a qualitative study of 60 high conflict separated and divorced co-parents. Each completed surveys about their experiences with parenting coordination, legal, and mental health interventions. Mandarino et al. (2016) noticed certain experiences where such interventions were not successful or helpful leading them to conclude that the experiences of some participants, “did not support common notions found in the literatures on parenting coordination and high-conflict divorce” (p. 564). Mandarino et al. (2016) suspected that interventions that used forgiveness or cognitive restructuring were

ineffective when one of the two partners exhibited personalities that were “narcissistic or low in empathy” (p. 564).

It can be cruel to ask a divorcing person to forgive or restructure their cognition to feel softer and less angry towards someone who has truly victimized them. While there are some excellent (although not fully tested) ideas for intervention, both Johnston (2006) and Mandarino et al. (2016) point out that there will be cases where such interventions may even be harmful if used on a spouse who has truly suffered horrible abuse.

The critiques of Johnston (2006) and Mandarino et al. (2016) are reminiscent of feminist critiques of family therapy. A fundamental aspect of family therapy is that all members of a family influence others and their behaviors (Nichols & Davis, 2017). Using this model Matise (2008) concluded that, “high-conflict divorces do not occur in a vacuum” (p.183). Feminist family therapists note a problem with this:

If all parts of a system are equally involved in its problems, no one is to blame. To feminists, the notion of equal responsibility for problems looked suspiciously like a sophisticated version of “blaming the victim and rationalizing the status quo.” This criticism was particularly germane in crimes against women, such as battering, incest, and rape, for which psychological theories have long been used to imply that women provoke their own abuse. (Nichols & Davis, 2017, p. 170)

At the very least, Johnston (2006) and Mandarino et al. (2016) remind us that, as counselors choosing interventions on couples or individuals involved in high conflict divorces, it is important to remember that “one size does not fit all”. Specific characteristics of the people

who seek counseling on these issues will often need different interventions. These considerations will have to be incorporated in future research.

Effectiveness of Undertested Interventions

As under researched and as challenging as this task may be, it is important to understand that even imperfect methods can help significantly. Ciprić et al. (2022) studied the effect of an online divorce education resource called “Cooperation after Divorce” (CAD) on 1856 Danish citizens who has officially received a divorce in the two years prior to the study. The study consisted of 1,031 participants who were part of the intervention group and 825 who were part of the control group. All participants took the self-report Divorce Conflict Scale (DCS) along with several other assessments to measure stress, anxiety, depression, hostility, mental health, and physical health (Ciprić et al., 2022). This was a longitudinal study where everyone took assessments before the online intervention to establish a baseline. Those in the intervention group took additional assessments at 3, 6, and 9 months following the intervention (Ciprić et al., 2022).

The CAD intervention is an “is an entirely online-based educational platform that comprises 17 digital modules” (Ciprić et al., 2022, p. 1130). Each module takes up to 30 minutes to complete. While other studies had shown this intervention effective at reducing stress, depression, anxiety, and hostility (Ciprić et al., 2022) this study focused on those who scored high in the conflict assessment. There was a “concern that the online mode of intervention/ help/ education might not be effective or sufficient for high conflict divorces” (Ciprić et al., 2022).

Ciprić et al. (2022) found that individuals in the intervention group with higher conflict scores fared worse on stress, depression, anxiety, and general health outcomes than participants

with lower baseline conflict scores. However, even those who scored high on the conflict scale in the intervention group ultimately scored much lower on these scales than those in the control group (Ciprić et al., 2022). These results suggest that even an online educational platform was a somewhat effective intervention in reducing stress, depression, and anxiety. Ciprić et al (2022) suggests that even basic information interventions with minimal testing can be effective in reducing the problems associated with high conflict divorce. In other words, even beginning guesses at simple interventions have had considerable success in beginning testing. This views such interventions with optimism. While it is hoped to have well tested and proven interventions in the future, it is optimistic to see some success even with the most basic informational intervention for those going through high conflict divorce.

Conclusion

While research into best interventions and strategies for counselors meeting with children and adults going through high conflict divorce may be in its infancy, there are promising signs. A number of strategies have been conceived drawing from interventions that have proven successful in areas that share qualities with high conflict divorce. To this end, strategies that take the best parts of family therapy and “convert” them to families going through divorce may prove effective with future research (Lebow & Rekart, 2007; Matise, 2008; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). A number of interventions that focus on forgiveness (Rye et al., 2005; Rye et al., 2012) of the ex-spouse have also shown optimistic results in beginning tests. Interventions based on psychoeducation (Ciprić et al., 2022; Lange et al., 2023) have also shown early success. Variations of cognitive behavioral therapy (Garber, 2015; Navidian & Bahari, 2014; Willen, 2015) have begun in early studies to also show promising results. While so much more research

needs to be done to prove certain techniques and interventions conclusively, early studies show promise.

Although family counseling is usually considered important for married couples who have difficulty, this research shows that counseling interventions can be helpful even for couples going through a divorce. In part, this is because all divorces are not created equal. Some divorces are more harmful than others (Forehand et al., 1994; Garber, 2015; Hines, 1997; Huurre et al., 2006; Johnston, 2006; Koemer et al., 2006; Modecki et al., 2015). Counseling interventions with those going through high conflict divorce is critically important. With the increasing rate of divorce (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007), it is inevitable that counselors working in the field will often see the effects of high conflict divorce. Research into effective interventions is critical because without it, counselors will be left to guess the best strategy to help someone who walks into their office seething with anger at their ex-spouse and parent of their children. While it is clear that an openly hostile high conflict divorce is detrimental to both the divorcing couple (Gutzman-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2016) and the children of the marriage (Hines, 1997; Huurre et al., 2006; Johnston, 2006; Koemer et al., 2006; Modecki et al., 2015; Rye et al., 2004; Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2016), the best way a counselor can do to help is profoundly less clear. Hopefully, in time, certain interventions will be studied in depth so that counselors can know with certainty which interventions are the most effective. In the meantime, counselors must take their best guess knowing that even the simplest and untested interventions have shown some promise (Ciprić et al., 2022) in helping reduce the destructive and harmful effects of high conflict divorces.

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